DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 668 HE 009 938

AUTHOR Varner, Iris I.
TITLE Business as a Liberal Art.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration; *Business Education; General Education; Higher Education; *Liberal Arts; *Liberal Arts Majors; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

Since one of the main arguments against business as part of liberal education seems to be that it has practical applicability, one should look deeper into the use of the more traditional liberal education subjects. Historically, what we interpret as pure liberal education had at the same time high practical value; this is still true. What seems to make business so different is partly that business involves huge sums of money, and money is somehow suspect in academe. Theoretical and philosophical as well as practical considerations are becoming more and more a part of business, and thus of business education, and bear a close relationship to other subjects taught as part of the liberal arts education. (Author/MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED154668

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Iris I. Varner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Dr. Iris I. Varner
Illinois State University

HE 009938

BUSINESS AS A LIBERAL ART

In most American universities the Colleges of Business report increasing student enrollments while Colleges of Arts and Science face smaller and smaller classes. At the same time there is a demand for the return to the basics and a return to true liberal education. Depending which side one stands on, the basics mean either the traditional humanistic subjects or a more practically oriented education. Accepting the position that a return to the basics means a return to true liberal education, two questions arise: 1) What is liberal education, and 2) Who in the university is entitled to a share in the liberal education program?

In order to answer the first question it is helpful to look at historical definitions and historical curricula of liberal educational institutions. In the middle ages liberal education consisted of a study of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. In the urban schools of the twelfth century the study of theoretical, practical, logical, and mechanical philosophy followed the study of the seven liberal arts. The study of mechanical philosophy included the processing of wool, navigation, medicine, and agriculture. These subjects were obviously considered very important to a functioning in the practical world and therefore considered part of a higher liberal education in the cities.

For the Humanist the goal of liberal education was the development of harmony and equilibrium within man. The affairs of man and his worldly aspirations became of interest. In humanism we are however confronted with an elite education. When Erasmus talks about education, he always talks about the education of a small group of people who would assume leadership positions in life. He is interested in the education of the prince and the scholar who would not worry about the

mondane things of life. The liberal education proposed by men like Erasmus, Vergerio, and da Feltre was meant to prepare students for their stations in the elite.

The Renaissance ideal of the educated man was someone who could do many things well, the man who could handle his private and public affairs with competence. The ideal gentleman is based on this concept. The gentleman of Henry Peacham had to show, among other things, ability in cosmography, geometry, poetry, music, sculpture, drawing, and painting. He was the polished man.

At the beginning of the 19th century Humboldt, the German philosopher and educator, turned away from education as service to society. He stressed the cultivation of the individual as all important. This separation resulted in a snobbish and tragic detachment from society. It developed an intellectual who scorned the practical affairs of the world and who was not well equipped to deal with it when he tried. This detachment stands in sharp contrast to the Renaissance ideal of the educated man.

In 1853, the English Cardinal John Henry Newman demanded that the university educate a man who could fill any post with credit, and who could master any subject with facility. At first glance this is a return to the Renaissance ideal insofar as it stresses the whole man, but Newman carefully distinguished between liberal education and technical education, and he very definitely was against any professional or technical education in the university.

In the 20th century Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer D. Adler have been the main advocates of a liberal humanistic education. In their opinion liberal education is the cultivation of the intellect through grammar, rhetoric, logic, theoretical mathematics, and the study of the classics. Liberal education is seen as fixed in content and aim since truth is permanent and never changes. It has been best expressed in the works of the classics, and therefore a study of the

classics provides the best path to get to that truth.

Liberal Arts Colleges have been carefully stating their philosophies over the last decade. Vassar for example sees as the purpose of liberal education the achievement of depth and range of knowledge; recognition of the different kinds of knowledge, their scope and relevance to each other; immediate experience of creative ideas, works of art, and scientific discoveries; development of the powers of reason and imagination; and increased knowledge of oneself.

In spite of controversies and changes through history, advocates of liberal education, with the exception of Humboldt, state a consistent goal of liberal education the education of a free man who can function well in his world. Most liberal educators today would agree to that definition, but the problem is that we cannot agree on a definition of free man and even less on what functioning in this world means.

The world has changed so tremendously that a well functioning liberally educated humanist of the 14th century would be completely lost in today's world. Today we can no longer afford to and we are no longer interested in giving education to a small elite only. We try to educate everybody. In an ever faster changing world adaptability and adjustment become important aspects of education. These problems were next to unknown in the last century. Life was stable, social norms and values were accepted traditions. People knew their "places" in life.

Even though the definition of liberal education has remained rather unchanged through the centuries, the exact curriculum content of liberal education has changed. Gradually the study of physics, history, natural history was added to the liberal arts curriculum. If asked today, most educators who do believe in liberal education would insist on the study of English and modern languages as traditional parts of any liberal education. Looking at old curricula it is amazing to see how late the study of English literature and modern languages has

entered the halls of liberal education. The study of English grammar was introduced at the beginning of the 19th century, before English literature. English grammar, however, was usually studied together with Latin grammar with the emphasis on Latin. At Miami University of Oxford, Ohio, the study of English literature appears for the first time in the catalogue of 1848, whereas Political Economics is listed already in 1845.

In order to answer the question who should be responsible for liberal education, we have to look at whom the colleges educated at various times. According to past records, most students entered the ministry and many became lawyers. One big argument that advocates of liberal education bring forward is that it educates the mind, that liberal education is not and should not be training for a profession, it should not be vocational. Yet, looking through old catalogues it is quite obvious that the liberal education at most universities was not all that detached from the practical aspirations of the students. To be ministers these students needed Greek, Latin, philosophy, and these subjects were definitely the core of the curriculum. A background in Latin was also essential for the study of medicine. With fewer people going into the ministry today and with the decreasing importance of Latin for medicine, the question arises whether this curriculum still is the only curriculum which provides a liberal education?

Many advocates of traditional liberal education express a very definite aversion to what they consider practical studies. It is often claimed that the subject matter of the humanities is closer to ordinary life than that of physical science, because the humanities prepare man for thinking, for making decisions in household, religion and politics. These people insist that it is the business of the liberal college to provide richness of mind, and in their opinion the crafts, techniques, and social skills are simply not on the same level as the great achievements of the human spirit in philosophy, literature and religion. The demands of

these people that liberal education should prepare man for decisions in his future world are identical with the Renaissance, but life has changed, and it can no longer be taken for granted that the humanistic subjects hold the monopoly in liberal education.

One of the problems of our times is that we have lost a binding philosophy and value system. We often do research which produces numbers but does not provide us with guidance and direction because we don't know what our goals are. In overcoming this problem a study of philosophy is essential, but at the same time this philosophy cannot be detached from our lives. An isolated study of philosophy or the classics will produce ivory tower scholars who make their decisions in a vacuum. Liberal learning has to concentrate on lasting values and at the same time be meaningful for the here and now. To those who argue that this is a watering down of standards and giving up liberal education ideals one can answer that liberal education through the centuries has never been rigid, that it has always changed and always adapted to the changing conditions of life, and that this change has always been denounced by traditional lists. If the truly educated man is the one who can run his affairs well and think and function in today's world, he has to be able to master more than the traditional humanistic curriculum. Life has become complex, and our own personal affairs are more complicated than ever. A person in our society has to make decisions about whom to vote for, how to handle his income, in what to invest, how to evaluate government actions. Without a knowledge of management, accounting, finance, law, and economics we simply cannot make educated and valid decisions. Business in that sense is not just the teaching of a trade; it is an integral part of being able to manage one's own affairs wisely. If liberal education educates the whole man, then education in business has to be part of his education.

There still remains the argument that most people who study business do so

because they want to become businessmen; therefore business colleges are trade schools, and it should not be the task of the university to educate tradesmen and technicians for industry.

This argument can be countered on several accounts. Most business programs do not turn out the narrow specialist that most critics envision, and many of the critics who come from Arts and Science prepare their students for future careers just as we do in business. Listening to the critics one sometimes get the feeling that liberal education improves with decreasing practicality and increasing detachment from real life. It is interesting that any newcomers to the field of liberal education have always been considered unworthy of admittance. This is true for English, modern languages, sciences, and now for business. Somehow the new has always been suspect in the halls of the liberal education gods. It is also interesting to observe that those who finally were admitted have always tried to close the doors behind them so that from now on the realm would be clean and uncontaminated by new trivialities.

How "pure" are the studies of liberal education? Since one of the main arguments against business as part of liberal education seems to be that it has practical applicability, one should look deeper into the use of the more traditional liberal education subjects. As pointed out above, the education at many universities was geared towards the ministry, law, and medicine. (In Europe medicine and law are still core studies at any university in contrast to America where these two disciplines have been set aside in professional schools. In America we admire lawyers and doctors, but at the same time many people feel that they are not quite worthy of equal standing in academia.) For those professions the liberal education provided was very relevant preparation for a profession. What we interpret as pure liberal education had at the same time high practical

relevance. This is still true today. The person who studies literature for example often teaches it afterwards. In that then these studies are also a preparation for a profession or career. And yet, these studies, according to many people, hold the exclusive key to enlightenment, wholeness, and self-fulfillment.

What is it then that makes business so different? It is partly connected with the fact that businessmen handle money or at least make decisions which involve huge sums of money, and money somehow is suspect.

Throughout history man has always had a love-hate relationship with money. We all want it, at the same time we look down on the person who handles it. Money is dirty, it is too close to the realities of life, and business as a result is extremely suspect by the "pure" academic subjects.

We often hear the argument from Arts and Science that our businessmen need more education in academic subjects, particularly philosophy and ethics. This is definitely true. The numerous scandals in industry over the last few years have brought this need very clearly out into the open, but unless the person who teaches the businessman understands more about business, the philosophical studies will be detached from reality. If the philosopher wants to interpret life, the direction of man, he has to first see what life now is like. This then means that the truly liberally educated philosopher has to be able to manage his business affairs well and wisely too. Instead of fighting each other business and the humanities should get together. The definition of liberal education still holds: the education of the whole man who can function well in his world, who is ethical and moral. The humanities alone will not be able to educate this man, and business cannot do it either. The person studying business needs a solid background in ethics, philosophy, history, language. The fact that values change does not mean there are no permanent values. Business for example has to understand why the concern for the

environment has grown. Business has to understand the basis for this concern. More and more businesses go international. In order to be successful in this venture, businessmen have to develop an understanding for different approaches to life; they have to understand different cultures and languages; they have to know about history as a shaping force.

Over the last few years many businesses have shown a growing concern over business practices. Everybody is aware of the scandals that kickbacks, illegal campaign contributions, and briberies have created. In light of this many companies have developed ethical guidelines for their employees. To set up meaningful rules, however, a background in ethics is essential, otherwise we try to solve every problem individually. Unless we understand the concepts behind the rules, we are lost in meaningless detail. The federal government, for example, has issued a rule that federal employees are not allowed to accept presents above $150 from people engaged in lobbying. This rule is precise but, by setting the limit at $150, it indicates that a gift of $149 would not violate the ethical rule. The precise rule does not necessarily reflect the spirit of the rule. It is extremely hard to legislate ethical behavior unless we understand the ethical foundation.

Many business colleges across the country have started to develop their own courses in business ethics and social responsibility of business. Why? Usually the philosophers who could teach those classes do not know anything or don't care about business. These courses taught by philosophers are therefore detached from the practical concern of business. If the philosopher wants to educate the student of today to make good and valid decisions he has to understand the environment these decisions have to be made in. This means that the truly liberally educated philosopher has to be able to understand the workings of business. Many universities list as one of their objectives the education of the enlightened citizen who can

make wise and responsible choices. In order to fulfill this goal the good citizen needs an understanding of business affairs. We have to understand the issues in order to get to the core of the problem.

Over the last decade the problem of pollution has come more and more to our attention. Many people believe that pollution has to be limited, but to be for or against pollution control is not enough. The educated person will look at the implications and consequences of pollution control or lack of it. How does pollution control affect the finances of a company, the investment of the stockholders, the price of consumer goods? Is the proposed program actually helping or does it simply spend money without achieving much? He will be able to ask the right questions and consequently make better decisions.

Should social legislation be supported or not? Support or rejection are based partly on our philosophical position, but here a decision based on underlying facts will be the better one too. Assuming one supports social legislation, one would still have to evaluate different approaches and programs. Where is the money coming from? Should taxes be raised and if so, how will a raise affect the taxpayer? Who is really paying for a program? Who should benefit from a program? Since the late 60's companies have come more and more under attack for making excessive profits, or, as Nader calls it, "obscene" profits. What does this term mean? There was the outcry from some critics that the oil companies made 300% profit which was considered bad and robbing the American people. Hardly anybody bothered to ask 300% profit on what, compared to what but all critics agreed that this was bad. The statement itself is a display of ignorance or attempt to cloud issues. By itself it is meaninless. The liberally educated person has to evaluate information critically and be able to accept or reject it intelligently. He has to understand what are profits, what are losses, how does a company arrive at its figures. This is hardly possible without a basic understanding of accounting and

the mastery of the business vocabulary as taught in business courses. Management is an integral part of true liberal education too. All of us have to manage our own affairs, but beyond that as voters we have to understand the management of government at various levels. A knowledge of management tools and principles, a study of how people relate to each other could help in deciding whether management is effective or needs improvement and whether improvement is possible. It will help in setting up effective management so that the money will actually go to programs and not be eaten up by the management process itself.

Many of our problems are communication problems. We are unable to relate to others effectively. This is particularly true for business situations. Courses in business communications help in sharpening language awareness and language skills and in developing the ability to think logically in business situations.

An educated person has to base his decisions on facts and not simply emotions. It is unworthy of a liberally educated person to break out in statements about exploitation of the consumer, lack of social responsibility of business, and bad management unless that person has looked at the problems and weighed alternatives. This is hardly possible without an understanding of business.

If the great liberal educators of the past like Erasmus, da Feltre, Vives, lived today, they would have to include business into their liberal education programs because business is an integral part in the development of the whole man.